
Kurt Schweigman and Lucille Lang Day. *Red Indian Road West: Native American Poetry from California*. Oakland: Scarlet Tanager Books, 2016. 110 pp.

California Indian literatures are both understudied and underappreciated in the field of Native American Studies today. Some of this neglect, perhaps, derives from the fact that the literary nationalist and tribal-centric paradigms that have dominated NAS in recent years are only partly applicable in California contexts. Demographics may offer some explanation here. According to the 2010 census, there are one hundred and eight federally-recognized tribes located within California's borders, along with one (the Juaneño Band of Mission Indians) that is recognized by the state but not the federal government. In addition to these disparately-sized *recognized* entities, there are also some seventy-eight other polities currently petitioning for recognition. The size of the recognized California tribes ranges from as few as five people to as many as four thousand, and collectively they occupy nearly one hundred separate reservations or rancherias. (Unrecognized groups are unable to collectively hold title over tribal lands in trust under federal law.) There is considerable variation, however, in the nature of the sovereign territorial spaces held by the recognized tribes. Some are as small as six acres in size. Some, like the Agua Caliente reservation (in Palm Springs), are located in the middle of urban centers. Some, particularly in the northern part of the state, are rural and relatively isolated. Finally, we should note that the overall Indian population in California is both surprisingly large and more diverse than that in many other parts of the country. As of 2010, California had the largest number of American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) people of any state (362,801). California also had the largest mixed-blood population (people identifying as AI/AN along with some other identified ethnicity) in the country, bringing the full tally of California Indian people to more than 720,000. And yet, despite this large indigenous presence, California has relatively little tribal land (trust land) within its borders, with less than 3% of its total AI/AN population living on a reservation or rancheria. More than half of the Indian people living in California are members of tribes located outside of the state, and many members of tribes indigenous to California live either without a reservation land base or off reservation.

Bearing some of this data in mind, the first reaction one might have upon hearing that a pair of editors has undertaken the task of producing an anthology "encompassing... Native American experience in California" would likely be a sympathetic shake of the head (11). To be sure, what Kurt Schweigman and Lucille Lang Day have set out to assemble in *Red Indian Road West* is not a *comprehensive* collection; such a book would be several times the length of this slender volume, and considerably more costly. The strengths of *Red Indian Road West* are many, however, and I would argue that it nicely complements its literary ancestor, Greg Sarris' 1994 anthology *The Sound of Rattles and Clappers*. Schweigman and Day offer a much larger cross-section of California Indian writing than Sarris was able to in his earlier book, including both contributors from communities indigenous to the area and other, diasporic writers. They also have had some success in countering the still-persistent northern California bias in California Native literary studies, by including writers from all over the state. The result is that *Red Indian Road West* is a diverse, generously-edited text that should appeal to a range of audiences—both academics and general readers.

One aspect of this collection particularly worth noting would be its inclusive and light-handed editorial philosophy, a wise approach for a book that will likely be received by some as an even

more “representative” corpus of California Indian texts than the editors likely intended. Thirty-one poets are included in *Red Indian Road West*, but none of them contributes more than three poems. Indeed, the vast majority of writers are represented by only one or two entries. Some of the authors included (Deborah Miranda, Wendy Rose, Natalie Diaz, to name a few) are likely to be more widely-known than others. Encountering such a small selection of their works in these pages, then, is a refreshingly egalitarian experience, one that highlights Schweigman’s and Day’s goal of producing a gathering of voices that explores the diverse experiences of “being Native American and living in California” without privileging any of those particular experiences, perspectives, or aesthetics (12). Structurally, the book is also quite loosely organized, with no clearly defined sections, no overtly declared organizational philosophy, and no editorial paratext (outside of a brief preface and a short introduction by James Luna). The editors seem to have elected to avoid clustering poems along geographic, tribal, or even thematic lines, and the effect of this is to allow each individual piece to register equally. There are, of course, recurrent themes that emerge throughout to provide some sense of cohesiveness to the collection, and there is, sometimes, an associative logic that leads from one poem to the next. The experience of place, the human connection to specific geographies, the persistence of traditional knowledge and stories, patterns of cultural endurance, and acts of historical witness all provide common subject matter in several contributions. But it is worth noting, even here, that *Red Indian Road West* avoids foregrounding any curatorial sensibility that its editors might have, opting instead to allow readers full latitude in developing their own reactions to each specific poem.

As a reader who approaches and employs poetry in a variety of contexts (teaching it in the classroom, presenting it at community events, enjoying it for private pleasure), I appreciate the diversity of expression in *Red Indian Road West*. “Native Americana,” a short comic poem by Sal Martinez (who self-identifies as a Pomo Indian who works as a security guard at the Garcia River Casino in Point Arena), represents perhaps one point on that spectrum of expression.

Ever watch a Western
and think man,
that John Wayne
has killed more
Italians
than any American
in American History?

I sure do.

It’s no wonder
why Iron Eyes
“The Crying Indian”

Cody
 felt it safer
 as a real
 Indian
 than a reel
 Sicilian. (49)

This is a more rhetorical voice than many of the others in the book, to be sure, and the poem relies on punning and the staccato delivery characteristic of good joke-telling for its effect. With its evocation of ordinary speech and its avoidance of aesthetic complexity in favor of a more pragmatic use of language, “Native Americana” possesses many of the qualities that one might associate, in a different context, with folk art. It works admirably in those terms, and by not framing it in any particular manner the book allows it to stand on its own merits.

At a different point on the spectrum, we might find a more established, widely-published poet like Carolyn Dunn (Muscogee/Cherokee/Seminole) whose “Outfoxing Coyote” opens in the following way:

Coyote
 is a Yurok man
 who lives in a
 Mormon mansion
 High on a hill
 In McKinleyville.
 He’s a storyteller,
 that one.
 Tells tall tales
 of perfect worlds
 and hard places
 from behind dark eyes. (31)

Dunn’s formal control of sound (employing consonance and subtle rhyme), use of metaphor, and refined rhythmic sensibility emerges with particular clarity when contrasted with a more conversational poem like “Native Americana.” But the remarkable thing about *Red Indian Road West* is the way the book’s structure urges that this contrast not be experienced by the reader in hierarchical or evaluative terms. One *could* compare poems like these formally, if one desired, of course. I would not hesitate to bring the book into a classroom setting where poetry was being discussed analytically in such a manner. But *Red Indian Road West* does not insist on such

pedagogical uses, nor does it suggest that such contrasts should be primarily critical in nature. This is precisely why one can employ the collection equally well as the centerpiece of a public reading in a non-academic context. I recently used the text for precisely that purpose at a day-long poetry festival held at a local indigenous community center, the Dorothy Ramon Learning Center in Banning, California. The audience for that event, composed of both university students and a wide range of “untrained” listeners, found equal pleasure in hearing and discussing works by Deborah Miranda, Georgiana Sanchez, Shaunna Oteka McCovey (all of whom I had encountered before reading *Red Indian Road West*) and E.K. Cooper (a previously unpublished writer whose work, obviously, was entirely new to me).

If there is a way in which *Red Indian Road West* may be a bit too narrow in its focus, it might be in the book’s privileging of works in the lyric mode. This decision makes some sense in light of the editors’ stated goal of presenting the diverse, personal experiences of California Indian peoples. It also may be a function of their more implicit goal—producing a book that would appeal at least as much to a general audience as to an academic one. The emphasis on personal lyric does have some limitations, however, in terms of the presentation of the diversity of indigenous poetic expression in contemporary California. Janice Gould, a writer who habitually makes skillful and sophisticated use of poetic forms, is represented here by a single poem, and there aren’t a large number of “formal” works by other writers in the collection as a whole. One also misses the presence of Esther Belin, a writer whose work tends to eschew lyric in favor of other, perhaps more “modernist” strategies particularly appreciated by seasoned poetry readers. At the same time, though, one must acknowledge that there are a variety of reasons behind the specific choices of poems included (or not included) in any anthology, including the general response to calls for submission, the contributing poets’ own desires, and the need to limit copyright fees and other costs. In the end, quibbling over omissions is a rather unsatisfying response to a book such as this. There is far more in the text to value than there are absences to lament.

James Luna describes *Red Indian Road West* as a “songbook of sorts” in his introduction, and notes “I hear music when I read the voices put forward” (12). That is a perceptive response to a book that does a great service in considerably broadening our appreciation of the breadth of poetic expression by Indian people of, from, and in California today. The final stanza of Kim Shuck’s contribution “When We Are a River” picks this point up nicely.

Story from elsewhere
Shifts rock
Asphalt
Renames
Trade paths become
Freeways
Songs mix in complicated pattern

In lines like these, we begin to see the ways in which *Red Indian Road West* becomes an index of survivance in a California context. For that reason alone, this is a book that should be purchased,

read, shared, taught, and supported. Anyone interested in broadening their understanding of California Indian poetry or in changing the nature of the critical narratives that we tell about indigenous California today will find *Red Indian Road West* to be a valuable source of inspiration and pleasure.

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